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DE RUEHGO #0588/01 1211101
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 011101Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4489
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0830
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 9606
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 4120
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1580
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3300
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 6701
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4315
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 0709
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0710
RUDKIA/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0355
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2643
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0288
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000588

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/01/2016
TAGS: PGOV PREL EAID SENV CASC BM
SUBJECT: CYCLONE MALA HITS HARD, DIES QUICKLY

RANGOON 00000588 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: P/E Chief W. Patrick Murphy for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Burma dodged another bullet from Mother Nature when Cyclone Mala hit landfall on April 29, quickly weakened into a tropical storm, and then completely petered out. Before arriving on the western coast of Burma, however, the cyclone created substantial rainfall and heavy winds that caused considerable damage, and several casualties, in a western Rangoon suburb. As of May 1, the GOB had not requested any assistance from UN agencies. There were no reports of Amcit casualties. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Burma, which emerged relatively unscathed from the 2004 tsunami, experienced another lucky break when Cyclone Mala hit landfall on April 29 and quickly weakened into a minor tropical storm. The cyclone formed in the Bay of Bengal and, according to international weather reports, gained in strength as it approached the western coast of Burma. The GOB, which issued a cyclone warning on April 28, reported that the storm peaked at the equivalent of a Category Four hurricane, with winds of over 120 miles per hour.

¶3. (U) The cyclone made landfall at about 12:00 noon local time on Saturday April 29 near the village of Gwa, in southern Rakhine State. The pristine coastline in this area is sparsely populated. Gwa is located about halfway between the tourist resort town of Ngapoli, 75 miles to the north, and the beach towns of Chaungtha and Ngwesaung, 50 miles to the south. Ngapoli caters to high-end foreign tourists, while local Burmese and foreign residents in Rangoon frequent Chaungtha and Ngwesaung. The cyclone arrived on a moderately busy long holiday weekend.

¶4. (U) According to local reports, the cyclone weakened almost immediately upon making landfall. A range of hills

runs down the spine of Rakhine State, which quickly reduced the cyclone to a tropical storm. By early morning April 30, the GOB meteorological service had downgraded the storm to an "unimportant land depression." The impact of the storm on coastal areas was not immediately known, although local sources indicated that a ten-foot surf and high winds destroyed several hotels and homes. Local officials and hotels evacuated foreign guests over the weekend of April 29-30. There were no reports of serious casualties in coastal areas.

15. (C) The arrival of Cyclone Mala was preceded by substantial rain and heavy winds during the night of April 28-29, resulting in severe flooding and damage throughout Rangoon and Irrawaddy Divisions. The GOB did not immediately reveal casualty figures, but a senior GOB official at the meteorological service told us that the storm had killed at least one Rangoon resident and injured several dozen. International media reports said that the storm killed two to four persons.

16. (U) Perhaps the area hardest hit by the storm was Hlaing Tharyar township, an industrial zone located in the western suburbs of Rangoon city and straddled by the Hlaing and Rangoon rivers. Locals describe tornado-like conditions that severely damaged several hundred homes and at least five factories, including two garment operations and a soft-drink plant. Flooding forced several hundred residents to evacuate the area, including two of the Embassy's local employees who reside in Hlaing Tharyar.

17. (U) We contacted major hotels in Ngapoli over the weekend and learned that only a handful of U.S. citizens were in the area and were preparing to depart the coast prior to the arrival of the cyclone. We have received no requests for assistance or reports of Amcits directly affected by the

RANGOON 00000588 002.2 OF 002

cyclone and related storms.

18. (U) We also spoke over the weekend with UN agencies. In accordance with lessons learned from the 2004 tsunami, key UN agencies have pre-positioned emergency supplies in Burma. Representatives from UNDP and UNICEF told us, however, that as of COB May 1 the GOB had not made any requests for UN assistance. UN officers plan to meet on May 2 with IFRC and Myanmar Red Cross representatives to assess overall damage and assistance needs.

19. (C) Comment: Once again, Burma got a lucky break. The GOB has frequently demonstrated an inability to quickly mobilize in response to a natural disaster or other public emergency. Cyclone Mala was no exception. The GOB's storm warning was issued late and not widely distributed. First-responders to scenes of flooding and storm damage were Burmese Army troops, dispatched to keep order, not to provide emergency assistance. City workers subsequently labored to quickly repair downed power lines and restore electricity for those few residents who receive any. Clearly any major natural disaster, however, would quickly overwhelm the GOB's limited capacity to cope. End Comment.

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